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ON

EGYPT'S PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANS

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Will the recent withdrawal of the British protectorate from Egypt and the setting up of the first independent Egyptian kingdom since the days of Cleopatra affect the work of Christian missionaries in the land of the Nile? At least this latest act in the drama of the region that harbored one of the oldest civilizations in the world cannot fail to turn attention to the present-day Egypt, with its economic, social and religious problems which may now be accentuated.

"Geographically," says a bulletin from the Washington, D. C., headquarters of the National Geographic Society, "the Egyptian field is a narrow one; for its 13,000,000 inhabitants are nearly all concentrated in the Nile valley, only a few miles wide, and in the flaring delta which has been built up at its mouth by the silt of ages. Outside of these main sections the only portions of Egypt that are inhabited are some scattered oases. Roughly, twenty-nine thirtieths of the area of Egypt is not cultivable, but is in the main rocky or sandy desert.

Life Colored By Mohammedanism (Subhead)

"Mohammedanism has given its characteristic earmarks to almost everything that makes up the life of the Egypt of today. The

Arabs, when they conquered the country in 641 A.D.--only nine years after the death of Mohammed--did not literally over-run the country by superior numbers. They were a military minority who dominated the majority of the agricultural Egyptians by their superior organization, ability, and activity. And slowly, but steadily their culture and religion almost completely conquered the people of the country.

"The Egyptians still clung to their old pagan worship of Osiris, Isis and Horus at the beginning of the Christian era. This cult, deficient as it was in many ways, at least inculcated some ideals of morality, and had, as its central tenet, belief in immortality and a system of rewards and punishments after death. The teachings of Christianity, therefore, found a fertile field in Egypt, and by the fourth century A.D. practically all Egyptians were followers of the primitive Christian church. Alexandria, indeed, became the center of Christendom and of the learning of the age. Then came the disagreement at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 over an abstruse matter of theology--whether Christ had a single or a double nature. The council rejected the former view, monophysitism; but the leaders of the Alexandrian school stood out for it, and all Egypt followed them. So the Egyptian Christian Church was pronounced heretical and went its own way. The officials over them, sent out from Byzantium, however, were orthodox and drew about them a small group, chiefly Greeks.

Conquered By Moslem Culture (Subhead)

"When the Arabs conquered Egypt, the Egyptian Christians, or Copts, were glad enough to be rid of their orthodox persecutors. At first their conquerors treated them tolerantly, but after a time began

persecutions. The new culture steadily engulfed them. Those Egyptians who married Arabs necessarily adopted the Mohammedan faith. Many others accepted the new religion to avoid persecution and to win a position of honor and respect--going over to the enemy was, in many respects, 'the easiest way.' In time Arabic--the language of the Koran---practically superseded Coptic as the tongue of the country and thus hastened the dominance of Mohammedanism.

"Those Copts who have clung to their religion throughout the thirteen centuries of growth of Mohammedan power in Egypt, represent the practically pure strain of the ancient Egyptians. They were looked down upon by the Mohammedans because of their religion and in turn harbored much the same attitude toward their conquerors. Naturally there was practically no entry of Arab blood into the Coptic ranks. But even in the case of the natives who adopted Mohammedanism and intermarried with the Arabs, there has been only a negligible alternation of type, because the Egyptians so greatly outnumbered the aliens. The result is that the blood of the great majority of the population of Egypt--the fellaheen or peasants--whether Moslems or Copts, has been altered scarcely at all. Practically, these lowly laborers might have stepped from the ancient carvings: they are but a fresh generation of the men who dragged the great blocks of stone into place to build the artificial mountains of the Pharaohs, or who dropped seeds into the mud of the receding Nile thousands of years ago, even as they are dropped today.

A Land of Mud Huts (Subhead)

"Egypt's resources are almost wholly agricultural, and in the

agricultural scheme the millions of fellaheen are the ultimate units. They work long hours scratching the soil with crude implements, or tediously raising water in skin buckets attached to pivoted poles that the thin stream may save their plants from parching. Taxes are heavy, and it is the lowly fellaheen who keep the treasury supplied. Living conditions are very poor; mud huts house most of Egypt's thirteen millions. In the fields in many sections they wear little more than a loin cloth, and the younger children of the villages go naked. When the fellah is 'dressed up' he wears a rough shirt and loose trousers.

"Of the 13,000,000 inhabitants with which the new Egyptian kingdom starts its existence, nearly 12,000,000, or close to 92 per cent, are Mohammedans; and almost 8 per cent are Christians. The difference is largely accounted for by Jews. By far the greater part of the million Christians in Egypt are followers of the Coptic rite, though in recent years more than 50,000 have become either Protestants or Roman Catholics.

"With its unbroken traditions from the days of the early Church fathers, and its existence wholly in the East where the Christian faith was born, the Coptic Church furnishes today probably the best index to the character of primitive Christianity. Only in a few of the churches affected by modernity are there benches. Through the ages the Copts have stood during their services. Coptic, though now a dead language, is employed for parts of the service, while other parts are repeated in the popular Arabic. The Copts as a whole are not willing to give up the peculiar faith of their fathers, and in some sections of Egypt the church is actively combatting the work of the Christianity from the West.

Moslem Customs Among Copts (Subhead)

"It is not always easy for the new-comer to Egypt to distinguish between Copts and Mohammedans among the laymen. The everyday customs and costumes of the Moslems have spread throughout all classes. Many of the Coptic women wear the characteristic face veil prescribed for Mohammedan women, though where Western mission activity is strongest, the custom is passing. The men, when they are reasonably well dressed, wear the flowing garments introduced by the Arabs; and all speak Arabic. In their family life the Copts are consistent monogamists, while theoretically at least, the Mohammedan Egyptian may have as many as four wives. One striking difference is in the matter of divorce. It is difficult among the Copts, but the easiest of formalities among the Moslems. Some writers assert that it was because of the constant temptation which Mohammedan ease of divorce constituted, that many Copts embraced the new religion soon after the Moslem conquest."

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